

Imagine this: You meet somebody you haven't seen for decades. He comes up to you at your 40th high school reunion, and says, "You're looking so old! You have gotten so grey!"

Do you:

- a) Slap him;
- b) Tell his that his transplanted hair plugs don't match his eyebrows; or
- c) Smile broadly and say thank you very much!

If you lived in India you would most likely choose response 'c,' because you have just been complimented, not insulted. In some cultures, the effects of age on the body are exaggerated because such effects are the sign of importance and wisdom -- not feebleness and diminishing capacity.

How many of you, especially women, have lied about your age claiming to be younger than you really are, or are so embarrassed by your age that you don't want people even to discuss your birthday in public?

We are a youth oriented culture that equates signs of age with loss of intelligence and power and desirability. In Rabbi Lewis' recently published book on Psalms, he quotes a remark of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel -- "Monotheism has acquired a new meaning: the one and only thing that counts is being young." Extreme makeovers -- plastic surgery, face lifts, botox, liposuction, collegan treatments, are all part of the way we flee from old age, attempt to retreat back into youth. Worship of one God is replaced by worship at the altar of youth.

While gazing at the face of his baby son Jacob, Bob Dylan wrote the song "Forever Young," containing the following lyrics:

May you always be courageous,
Stand upright and be strong,
May you stay forever young,...

May your hands always be busy,
May your feet always be swift,

...

May your heart always be joyful,
May your song always be sung,
May you stay forever young,...

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It's a beautiful song, it's a beautiful prayer, it's a beautiful message for a young child to retain the vibrancy, the curiosity, the potential, the strength, swiftness, and joy of youth.

It was very much in step with the times when it was written, in 1973, when youth was king and anyone in the older generation was looked at with suspicion.

It remains a beautiful song and I don't want to downplay the positive aspects of its message, but we all know that in reality, we do not stay forever young. We age, and as we grow old, our bodies change. Our arthritic hands don't move as easily as they used to, our feet don't step so lively, our knees hurt, our backs are bowed, and our strength diminishes. The question that each of us faces, then, is not how to stay young, but rather how to grow old.

Consider this: If you are 65 years old today, relatively healthy, with a relatively healthy diet and life-style, your average -- AVERAGE -- life expectancy is 30-35 years. That's 30-35 YEARS. If you retire at 75, you have 20 years. Old age is lasting a lot longer than it used to. At some point,

the effects of aging will slow you down -- but white hair and wrinkles should no longer be seen as a sign of the loss of vitality. Organizations are relying on the 65-80+ year old “retirees” as a critical component of how they function.

Think about what you did from the ages of 25 to 45, 30 to 50, or 40 to 60? Imagine that you have those years to live over again, between the ages of 75 and 95. How will you live your life?

Drew Leder, in the book Spiritual Passages, presents several models of aging, which can be quite instructive as we contemplate aging with intention.

There is the Sociomedical Model of Aging, in which the effects of aging are problems to be fixed, to help older people continue to live their lives as they did when they were younger.

There is the Productive Model of Aging, which believes that it’s best to “die in the saddle” - always be busy with activities and commitments.

There is the Consumer Model of Aging, which asserts that older people, after working all of their lives, deserve to take a break.

Each of these traditional Western models of aging has serious flaws.

The focus of the Sociomedical Model is on applying the appropriate personal, professional, and governmental remedies to address a series of social and medical problems of aging. There are diseases and disabilities to treat and overcome. There are economic disadvantages, such as how to pay for shelter, food, and health care costs when earning power is diminishing. And there are psychological problems, the sense of loneliness and uselessness that plagues many of the elderly.

There are personal, family, medical, and public policy solutions to these problems, but this exactly the problem with the model -- aging becomes a series of problems to be overcome. Your life is handed over to the doctors, the politicians, the social workers, and the gerontologists. When their solutions no longer work then death comes along as the final mark of failure. In the final analysis of this model, life is a competition against old age, and old age and death always wins.

In the Productive Model, we see that older people can be just as active and useful as anyone else. There are causes to support, groups to join, and books to read. We can be inspired by stories of octogenarian activists.

The problem is that old age becomes an indefinite extension of middle age. The dream is that we can overcome all frailties, but what happens if we don’t drop dead while engaging in some worthwhile activity? This model, linked to the capitalist focus on productivity, measures our worth by how much we can do or make, not just who we are. At some point in our lives, don’t we yearn for some relief from constant demands and pressures? Have we forgotten how NOT to do? What about the rest and enjoyment that retirees long for? In the final analysis of this model looms the question, ‘What happens if we lose our ability to participate because our frailties outrun our desire?’ It is likely at some point that we lose the ability to participate in all of our activities. At this point, this model leaves us to sink into depression or feel guilty for having failed.

The Consumer Model embraces the idea that we’ve worked hard all our lives and built up a nice nest egg which allows us to spend our twilight years without worrying about money. Time now to enjoy pleasant leisure time. We can do what we want, when we want to do it - we move to the retirement village and stop worrying about cooking, cleaning, taking care of the lawn, we have a full slate of activities before us for when we choose to partake. We have no responsibilities any more, other than those in which we choose to engage. The mottos are “it’s my turn now” and “shop till you drop.”

The problem is that while a little vacation is enjoyable, too much vacation for too long may grow trivial and boring. One might feel disconnected from the significance of one's former life. Is there no more to life than consuming the next meal, seeing the next movie, or playing the next game of golf or tennis? A life devoid of responsibility can also lack significance.

Each of these three models is lacking something. This final model of aging draws from the previous three but adds an important balancing dimension -- providing for the spirit.

The Spiritual Model of Aging is one which asserts that living with wisdom provides fulfillment "heart and soul, mind and strength."

The later years thus are not a fight against physical or mental decline; or a war against inaction; or an attempt to keep oneself occupied with pleasurable pursuits. Primarily, the later years are an opportunity for soul-expansion. When the body breaks down, when we are no longer able to be productive, when we need more meaning than shopping -- if we have nurtured the spiritual side of ourselves, we value ourselves as more than a broken human being, more than a non-productive entity, more than a consumer.

The losses associated with the passage of years can provide modes of liberation - they thrust us against the limits of our body, and invite us to go beyond physical selves. They provide the impetus, the maturity, and the leisure to plunge into a spiritual quest. The quest may involve keeping our bodies fit, keeping intellectually and socially active, and taking leisure time for ourselves, but it goes beyond this.

In earlier times, the elder members of a community were the honored leaders. When an elder enters the room, instructs the Torah, one should rise in deference to the white haired head. There is a Midrash which suggests that the fragments of the first broken set of tablets were kept in the ark with the new set in order to remind the community that its intellectually broken members who no longer could express their learning were as intrinsically valuable as the young, intellectually vibrant members.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi suggests that as old age has been drawn out, we have the opportunity in the last quarter of our lives to harvest and enjoy the fruit of the lives that we have planted, and also to plant the seeds for the next generation. The members of the elder generation have the responsibility to be the keepers and tellers of the stories of the past in order to transmit their values to the next generation; to be mentors teaching the next generation; to be mediators of conflict, monitors of public bodies, mobilizers for social change, and motivators for people to work for the public good. Reb Zalman calls such people "sages." When we age with spiritual intention and purpose and pay attention to our responsibilities, we transform ourselves into sages.

Some of us are younger, and some of us are older. But none of us are too young or too old to begin either planning for our later years or strengthening the way we are living those years. I strongly recommend Reb Zalman's book [From Aging to Saging](#) and later next spring or summer I will be bringing in a couple programs from the Great Lakes Center for Sages.

Each of us, young and old, is in process of growing older. May our aging be infused with spiritual intention; may we focus on the **ability and power** contained within our aging bodies, rather than on their diminishment; and may we embrace the privileges and responsibilities of becoming a sage or a future sage in our communities.